5c. FICTION NUMBER. 5c.

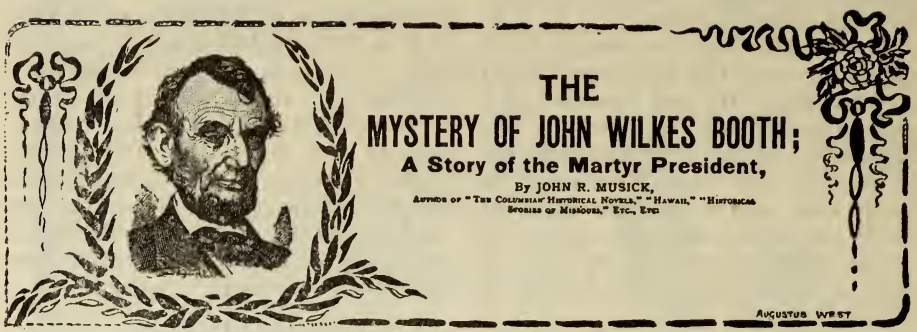
ILLUSTRATED.

The NICKELL

1901

MARCH

Published Monthly by The Nickell Publishing Co., New York, N. Y.


THE
MYSTERY OF JOHN WILKES BOOTH;
A Story of the Martyr President,
By JOHN R. MUSICK,
Author of "The Columbian Historical Novels," "Hawaii," "Historical Stories of Missouri," Etc., Etc.
Augustus West

SYNOPSIS OF FOREGOING CHAPTERS

A soldier of the Confederate army, of Corsican birth, crosses the Northern lines to see his dying child. After the death of the child, he is suddenly captured and taken to Port Tobacco, where he is tried and sentenced to be hanged as a spy. A mysterious woman, who seems to have a hypnotic power over men, makes a futile trip to Washington, to intercede for the man's pardon. After several unsuccessful attempts to see the President, she receives a telegram telling of the man's execution. On hearing this she visits the graves of the man, his two children, who have died, and his wife, who committed suicide at the hour of his execution, where she takes an oath of vengeance, and vows that a single hand shall strike a blow that will make the accursed North weep. Capt. Claude Mitchell, of an Ohio regiment, is captured and saved from death by Geo. Odell, a young Confederate officer. The two become fast friends, and afterwards meet in the city of Louisville, making the acquaintance of John Wilkes Booth and a mysterious woman playing in his company, who seems to have a hypnotic power over men.

CHAPTER V.

The Conspirators.

It is well known that Port Tobacco was at the time of this story one of the most secluded and abandoned portions of the military district in which it was situated. An old stone house stood on the outskirts of the cluster of buildings called the village, through which ran a dark passage leading to a little, gloomy yard at the end of which was a second building in a singularly miserable and dilapidated condition. On the ground floor in front of the house was a half subterranean store or shop, in which were sold coal, wood, milk, vegetables and liquors to the officers and soldiers quartered near.

Nine o'clock in the morning had just struck. The mistress of the miserable little store, Mother Wood, an old woman of a sickly countenance, clad in a brown dress, with a red bandanna wound about her head, like the plantation negro wenches, had mounted on the top step of the stairs which led down to her door, and was employed in displaying her wares for sale—that is, on one side of the door she placed a milk can, on the other some bunches of stale vegetables, flanked by yellow cabbages. At the bottom of the steps in the shadowy depths of the cellar, one could see the light of the fire burning in the little coal stove.

This grocery store being situated in the basement, on one side of the passage, the upper portion of the building served as a lodging house for the demented and unfortunate people who from a morbid desire for the miserable or misfortune were compelled to remain long in Port Tobacco.

Suddenly a pretty little creature, coming from the house, entered lightly and merrily into the store. This pretty girl was Rose Palmer, a young creature whose father had fallen in the Confederate army, and whose mother had eloped with a Union deserter. She was a merry, good-for-naught child of seventeen, badly spoiled because she was a general favorite. Being early left to her own resources and possessing a splendid voice and light foot, she drifted to the variety stage, where she soon became the idol of the soldiers who patronized that class of entertainment. A sick

friend had caused her to come to Port Tobacco, where she sang comic songs and danced for the amusement of the troops, who contributed a large share of their "shin plasters" and greenbacks to her entertainment. One of the officers, who professed to be something of a critic, declared that Rose had great talent which ought to be cultivated.

Rose Palmer had just quitted her bed, as was evidenced by the negligence of her strange morning costume. No doubt for want of any other headdress, on her beautiful hair jauntily sat a fatigue cap borrowed from some soldier. Nothing could be more inspiring than her face and sparkling, bright blue eyes. She was closely enveloped from neck to feet in a blue army overcoat, for the air was raw. Her naked feet, so white that one could not tell if she wore stockings or not, were slipped into little morocco shoes with bright steel buckles. It was easy to perceive that she kept some article concealed under her coat.

"Good morning, Rose," said Mother Wood with a kindly air. "You are early this morning. Did you dance last night?"

"Don't talk of it, Mother Wood. I had no heart to dance after they brought in poor Joe from the picket line with an ugly bullet in his side, which the doctors say may prove fatal. But say, didn't your boy come from the West?"

"Now, look here, girl," said the old woman, with a frown on her face, "don't go to talkin' about that good for nothin' scamp of mine. You won't be angry?"

"Am I ever angry?" Rose asked, shrugging her shoulders.

"No, no, child. Bad as you may be, your heart is ever in the right place."

The girl put out her hand, which held a pitcher, from under the blue army overcoat and said:

"You have new lodgers, Mother Wood?"

"Do you know them?"

"I saw Atzeroth and the boy with him, and the stage last night brought a woman."

The old woman shook her head in a mysterious manner, while the girl set the pitcher on the dark table and said:

"Beer."

"My child, you are early athirst this morning," remarked the old woman.

"It's not for myself. Jack slipped away from his barracks and came over to have me get some for him, as regulations won't allow it down at the camp." As the old woman turned to the keg to draw the beer, the girl asked:

"Does the boy stay here?"

"Rose, what is the boy to you? Now don't go to leading him astray and breaking his heart."

"Boy, indeed," laughed Rose. "Why, he is a year older than I. But talking of new-comers reminds me of my duty: have you all the lodgers you can accommodate, Mother Wood? Couldn't you make room for poor Joe on the second floor, where he could die in peace instead of by inches in those miserable barracks?"

"Yes, there's a narrer room in the attic, just over one o' the rooms o' the mysterious woman."

"You mean the woman who came last night? Have you learned anything more about her?"

"Dear me, no, child, only she come on the midnight stage, and knocked at my door. 'Have you a letter for me?' she asked, and I gave her that strange gabble of nonsense about engagements, parts and all that stuff. Then she wanted that room she had written about, and I fixed it for her."

"Is she asleep yet?"

"No doubt."

"What is her name?"

"Belle."

"Belle who?"

"I don't know. The boy calls her Cousin Belle, and as soon as he came asked if she had arrived."

"They must know each other?"

"You would think so by the way he went on. He was perfectly happy when he saw her, and I half believe

they are lovers; but, lawks sakes, there's a mighty sight difference in 'em. She's a fine lady and he's only scrub stock, one can see that by just lookin' at 'em."

"Mother Wood, what does she do in that dark hole, where one can hardly see at sunny noon?"

"Now, that's just what I say. It can't be to look over her furniture, for she's nothing but a bed, a table, a stove, a chair, and the trunk which she brought with her."

"She's sorter like Black-eyed Phil, ye know, who deserted from the Forty-fifth Ohio, kinder mysterious."

"Beside all that, Rosey, she's mighty curious. She's alfired 'fraid some one will come in her room, just as if we were all thieves, and her trunk was chuck full o' gold. Had a patent lock put on her door at her own expense; never leaves her key, lights her fire herself, and lets no one in her room."

"How old is she?"

"I'd say about twenty; may be some more and may be less."

"And pretty?"

"Pretty, why she's the most bewitchin' critter ye ever saw in yer life. Her face is a dream an' her voice music itself. She's undoubtedly the prettiest thing ever in Port Tobacco."

"What can she be doing alone in those rooms?"

"Now ye got me, child."

"D'ye suppose she's at home to anybody?"

"I dunno; I saw her talkin' with Atzeroth and Harold in the hall."

"What were they sayin'?"

"Dunno. It was all in whispers, and when I came up she just give me a look that semeed to burn right through me, and turning about walked off to her room. When I asked Atzeroth and Harold about her they looked kind o' mysterious, and kept silent. Now, it's my opinion she's no better'n she ought to be, and as I've got to sustain the respectability o' my house, I am not goin' to stand her conduct much longer. Oh, the young people now days, the young people now days!" groaned the old woman, waving her hands up and down in a deprecatory manner.

"Easy, Mother Wood; you were young once."

"I don't believe it. I've always thought of myself much the same as now."

"Did you ever have lovers, Mother Wood?"

"Lovers! sweethearts! Oh, my child, I was too ugly for them, and too well taken care of."

"Your parents looked after you?"

"No, I was sent to the fields by my uncle to work in the cotton and tobacco with his niggers. But now, thank God, he's lost his niggers, though he was dead twenty years before it came about. I wish it had happened thirty-five years sooner."

Rose took up her pitcher of beer and went back to the thirsty soldier, her pretty head wagging in a mysterious manner.

"If she's come here to outshine me," she growled, "she'll have to get up very early, lemme tell ye!"

Meanwhile the woman who was the object of the above comments sat alone in her small dark room, her face close to a narrow, dirty window. She was looking out upon the dismal and unlovely scene, her great dark eyes seeming lighted with the sullen fires of vengeance and despair. It was a sad and melancholy, wintry day, the wind sighing through the barren branches of the old oak which stood near the corner. All through the long blustry day the woman sat by the window gazing out upon the slate-colored sky and long, dreary-looking road winding like some slothful serpent to the soldiers' camp.

When evening came she lighted a candle and pulled down the blinds. An hour later and there came a light knock at the door. The same youth who had served her so faithfully in Washington entered. Not a word passed between them until he was seated in a chair near the stove, in which a fire

burned, and the door had been noiselessly closed and bolted.

"Are the others coming?" she asked.

"They will be here soon," he answered.

His eyes never forsook the bewitching face which seemed to possess some wonderful fascination. Both spoke in low tones and seemed to have a perfect understanding with each other.

"You have been gone a long time," the youth finally whispered.

"Yes."

"I feared they would never let you return."

Fixing her eyes on him in a strange, weird manner, she answered in slow, impressive words:

"It might have been better for you, Harold, if I never had."

"No, no, Belle, you know I love you," declared the youth.

The expression of pain which swept over her face was only momentary. It was gone in a minute, and her beautiful features were hard, cold and expressionless, beaming with intellectuality without sympathy.

"Have you read English history?" she at last asked.

"Yes."

"Then the story of young Douglas and Mary Queen of Scots must be familiar to you."

"It is, and Douglas was never more willing to die for his queen than I to lay down my life for mine."

"No, no, not for me, but the cause!" she said quickly, as a slight twinge of conscience stirred her troubled soul.

"The cause! I have repeatedly told you I cared not for the cause. What is the cause to me? What can it be to you, and you a foreigner? Neither North or South should be aught to you, who a twelvemonth ago, could hardly speak our language."

"True, dear boy, and it was from your lips I learned it. Harold, you have been my hope through all these troubles, and on you I shall rely to the end."

"I will follow you, though it be to the gallows," he answered in a voice that evinced neither excitement nor emotion. He was a romantic youth, and the story of Douglas stirred his soul to its depth. Douglas had been the hero of his boyish dreams and he longed to emulate him. Harold was a plastic youth, as impressionable as wax, and as susceptible to influence as a child. He had a strong mind of his own, but that mind was liable to be swayed and moved by minds still stronger. In doing the will of those on whom his affections were set he was strong as adamant, and wholly immovable. When he said "I will follow wherever you direct" he meant every word of what he said. For a few moments the two sat in silence, awaiting the arrival of others. Then came low, faint footsteps, and a light tap. The door was opened by Belle herself, and two men entered. They were Atzeroth and Wood, or Payne, as he was sometimes called. Atzeroth was a foreigner on whose face was the impress of the Austro-Hungarian. His eyes were of a greenish-dark color, his manner fixed and determined. He had felt the heel of oppression in other lands until he had grown to despise all governments and rulers. Every ruler was a tyrant in his eyes and only a fit subject for the assassin's dagger. He was of the metal from which anarchists are made. Wood, or Payne, as he was called, was a fiery Southerner. His heart was so enwrapt in the cause of the South that he had sworn in some terrible way to avenge her, even if the cause was lost.

When the four assembled they sat for some moments in silence. Perhaps the most conspicuous character, after the woman, was Harold, who was carried away by the wonderful being who wielded such powerful influence over minds stronger than his. Not only did she hold up such examples as the unfortunate young Douglas, but carried him away by execrable quotations from the leading dramatists, and fired his soul with enthusiasm. Harold was a gunner, and therefore versed in arms; he had traversed the whole lower part

of Maryland and was therefore a geographer as well as a tool. His friends lived in every farmhouse between Washington and Leonardsville, and he was respectably enough connected to make his association creditable as well as useful in the awful conspiracy which was being hatched, for never were plotters of murder more foul assembled to contemplate horrible work.

The conspiracy had its own time and kept its own counsel. For its victims it had the very heart and brain of the nation. Murder was seldom mentioned except by genteel implication, but they all agreed that the Southern Confederacy, then struggling in the last throes of its existence, ought to be avenged. The North, which had its clutches about the throats of the infant republic, was choking out its young life; the North was a race of fratricides. Brutus was held up as a model of heroism, and Belle, who had the rich, deep voice of a tragedienne, repeated heroic passages to the delight of Harold, who learned them from her own beautiful lips, and wondered if he was born to greatness.

In this growing darkness, where all rehearsed cold-hearted murder, the mysterious Belle grew to a wonderful statue of liberty and love, whose pedestal was the ruins of the American nation. She had found a purpose consonant with her evil nature, and had influence over weak men; so she grew moodier, more vigilant and more plausible. By mien and temperament she was born to handle the stiletto. There never was a face more markedly Corsican; she would have stood for a second Lucretia or Charlotte Corday. All who came under her influence were swayed or persuaded by the mysterious power with which she moved people. She laid before her co-workers three schemes.

The first was to kidnap the President and Cabinet and run them off South, or blow them up. The second plan was, if kidnapping failed, to murder the heads of the government and seek shelter in Richmond, still held by the Confederates. The third plan was, in case the rebellion failed, to be its avenger, and throw the whole country into consternation, while they escaped by the unfrequented paths of Maryland.

When this last resolution had been formed by the head and heart of the conspiracy, the plot was both contracted and extended. At this time the innocent instrument of this hellish design, on whose head mountains of obloquy were to fall, was thousands of miles away, nor did his gentle soul harbor a thought of blood or vengeance. With consummate skill and cunning the woman laid her plans, and by mysterious powers bent all her slaves to her will. There were two distinct circles of confidants, those aware of premeditated murder, and those who might shrink from such a deed, though willing to be accessories in a crime of less magnitude. Two colleagues for blood were found in Payne and Atzeroth, and at once accepted, while to Harold, McLaughlin and Jim Arnold it was only represented as a bold, dashing plan by which the heads of nations could be carried away alive and unharmed, prisoners of the Southern Confederacy. To them, the scheme instead of being one of horror from which honest men would shrink, was a deed of daring, calculated to excite the admiration of an enemy.

The mysterious unknown, called "Cousin Belle," who was the soul of the dark plot, had been pleading long with the three conspirators, urging them to nerve themselves for the coming struggle which was to relieve the South.

"Our cause," she remarked in her deep, thrilling tones, "is not lost; all will yet be gained. We will win—we must win—and by your aid we shall win. Our cause is justice!" Then in a low, solemn voice, with a distinct pause after each word, she continued: "If the worst must come, I know who will do the deed, even though he does it alone."

"Who—where is he?" asked Harold,

a little pang of jealousy piercing his heart.

"He is not beyond my call. I could bring him at any time. He would willingly lay down his life for me."

"Has he the Southern cause so at heart?" asked Harold.

"He is no soldier. He does not think of that—his sympathies may be with the North, but that makes little difference to me. What care we, so that we can find one to do our work for us?"

Harold heaved a sigh, and Atzeroth thought it best not to have too many in the secret, as secrets can only be kept by a few. She answered in her low, thrilling manner that she had fully considered everything and well knew whom she could trust.

At this moment footsteps were heard upon the stairway, and voices in the hall. The conspirators exchanged glances of alarm, and Belle blew out the candle, leaving them in total darkness, while Payne placed his fingers on the bolt of the door to assure himself it was secure. The voice of Rose could be heard on the landing, saying:

"This way with him, boys. This is the room in which he is to lie. There, do be careful, Jack, and don't hurt poor Joe. You don't know how soon you may have an ounce of lead in your own gizzard."

A groan of some one as though in great pain was heard on the landing, and the slow, steady tramp of heavy feet accompanying it.

"Mein Gott in Himmel, he vas nod so lighd as von chicken!"

"No, Dutch, I dare say you have stolen fowls enough to know their relative weight."

"Dot girl dalks doo much some dimes."

"And you drink more beer all the time than the officers know anything about, or you would spend most of your time in the guard house."

"Don'd be zo bersonal."

"Here, here! Stop your growling, and move on!" commanded the sergeant in command. "Rose, hold up the candle so we can see what we are doing."

Four men, with a fifth on a stretcher, made their way along a narrow hall, preceded by Rose, with a candle in her hand, and followed by the sergeant. Rose led them up four or five steps, where they had to make a difficult turn, the wounded man alternately cursing and groaning all the while.

"Oh, Joe, don't take it so hard," said Rose, unlocking the door. "The surgeon will soon come and have that rebel bullet out o' ye, an' ye'll feel easier."

"Shut up, you jade!" growled the wounded man. "It's well enough for you, who never had a taste of lead, to say take it easy, but if you was torn to pieces as I be, you might alter your tune."

Rose fitted the key to the lock, turned the rusty bolt back in its socket and pushed open the door.

The four men, bearing their wounded comrade, patiently waited. "I'm weak; I've lost nearly every drop of blood in me," the wounded man groaned.

"You ain't lost any o' yer weight," declared one of the stretcher bearers.

"Bob Wright, you've not lost any brains, for ye got none to lose."

"A fitting repayment for all my kindness to ye."

"D—n such kindness, when ye lug me about as if I was a dead pig."

The wounded man was laid upon a bed, which, rough as it was, proved far superior to anything the camp could afford. They had no field hospital on the ground, and the only place available for him seemed a little attic room which Rose Palmer had secured. The wounded man was very irritable, swearing that Rose and her companions were butchering him by inches.

"Joe, you'll be ashamed when ye git well an' know how good Rose has been t' ye. Just see what a nice room she's got for ye," expostulated the sergeant.

"An' paid a week's rent out o' my own money," declared Rose.

"A nice room—call this cubby-hole

a nice room? Who's in the next, I'd like to know?" growled the wounded man.

"It's a lady that has come here," Rose declared.

"Who is she, Rose?" Jack asked.

"I don't know, a bit more'n the man in the moon. 'Spose you'll be wantin' to find out so ye kin flirt with her."

"Now, Rose, don't be jealous. I ain't goin' back on the girl as sat by my side all night while I lay wounded on the battlefield."

Rose gave her pretty head a toss which threatened to dislodge the soldier cap, and made some sweeping remark about doing her duty for any man.

Meanwhile some of the other soldiers had taken up the discussion about the mysterious woman. One wanted to know what she was like. Some one had said she was young and handsome, while others had heard she was mysterious. No one could surmise why she should choose this out-of-the-way place unless she had a sweetheart among some of the officers. Did she ever receive any attentions from those in camp? Rose thought not. At least she had never been seen talking with any one, save two men, both of whom were citizens. One was a boy whom Rose thought was a relative, as he addressed her as Cousin Belle.

"Belle, Cousin Belle!" sighed Joe from his bed of pain. "Oh, what a sweet name is Belle. I am going to see her."

"Look here, Joe, you'd better be thinkin' about gittin' well or dyin', rather than gittin' up a flirtation with some one ye don't know nothin' about," declared Rose.

"Will some'n go an' fetch the surgeon? He'll never find the way himself," declared Jack.

"I'll go," said Rose, cheerfully, always willing to do more than her share.

"No you won't," groaned the sufferer. "I want you here when it is done."

Dutch was selected for the service, and next moment the clumsy German was heard making his way down the narrow stairway.

When he was out of hearing, Belle rose, and softly pushing back the bolt, whispered:

"You must go away. It will never do for them to suspect." They arose at her command, and she added: "Not all together; one at a time. Here, Atzeroth, do you go first. Look sharp, and be sure the hallway is clear before venturing out." Atzeroth slipped noiselessly into the hall, and a few moments later was followed by Payne.

"I am last," whispered Harold. "I could not say good bye when others were around. When shall I see you again?"

"Soon."

"Where?"

"In Washington. I will be there before I leave this part of the country." He took her hand and silently raised it to his lips, heaved a sigh, and went out.

CHAPTER VI.

A Confession.

A wild night on the mountains, with a maddened gale sweeping through the pass where six horses attached to a great covered sledge are going at a trot, is the next scene in this historic panorama. Owing to the snow in the mountains the overland stage had been put on runners, in the hope that it might more easily make the journey. There were but two passengers inside the vehicle, a man and a boy, who were closely muffled, for the night was intensely cold. The driver, whose bronzed cheek had been tanned by mountain winds and browned by summer suns, stamped his feet on the dashboard to keep them from freezing. He had witnessed many thrilling experiences along this very road, and over these very mountains, but none so uncomfortable as the present.

The passengers within were John Wilkes Booth, the great actor, and the wonderful boy vocalist who had en-

tranced the people of the Pacific Coast. The boy was remarkable in every respect. His eyes were large, dark and lustrous, his face girlish and beardless, his features handsome and faultless, his form perfect in symmetry and contour, while his voice charmed all who heard it.

As the two were whirled along the dreary pass in the midst of the howling storm, Mr. Booth said:

"Herman, I owe my success to you. I was almost on the eve of failure, and should have failed but for your timely arrival. You shall be amply rewarded for your services."

After a long silence the boy answered:

"Mr. Booth, the consciousness of having been of service to you is reward enough, as I have often told you."

"Why this interest in me, Herman?"

"I could not exist but for you," he answered.

"Yet you never saw me until we recently met in San Francisco. I never heard of you until you came to my hotel and proffered your services to help pull through my failing attraction."

The lantern burning inside the covered sleigh dimly lighted the interior and cast strange dark shadows on the features of the inmates. A smile played over the handsome face of the boy as he answered:

"Was it possible for so great an actor as J. Wilkes Booth to live on the same continent, and I not see him?"

"You mean you knew me?"

"Yes."

"I don't recall you, and yet your remarkable power of enchanting the world ought to be known to every actor. It was a godsend that you came to me, I assure you, for you seemed to bring good fortune with you." The actor, heaving a sigh, added: "Another was to have joined me at San Francisco, but came not."

"Who was it, Mr. Booth?"

"One like yourself, who brought good luck."

"Do you mean Sybil?"

Booth glanced at his companion in amazement and asked:

"Do you know her?"

"Yes."

"Where can I find her? She has not been out of my thoughts since we parted at Louisville. The woman exercises such wonderful power over me that I am miserable when not with her." The actor had worked himself up to a pitch of frenzy. He was suffering the keenest anguish, and talked so strangely and wildly that any other than Herman would have believed him mentally unbalanced. "She promised to come to San Francisco and bring a renewal of that good fortune, but the woman whom I loved, and whom I believed loved me, came not."

Laying his hand on the arm of his excited companion, Herman said:

"Be calm, Mr. Booth, and let me ask you a question. Did Sybil promise to meet you in San Francisco?"

"She did."

"Be assured she kept her word, for Sybil was never known to fail!"

"How dare you say that? Think you I am blind?"

"Did she say in what form or manner she would appear?"

"Appear—great God!" gasped Booth, shrinking into a corner of the vehicle. "Is she a ghost that appears and disappears at her own capricious will? I swear I am half inclined to believe it!"

With a smile, Herman, in his low, rich voice, answered:

"No; though Sybil does possess powers unknown to the world, she is no disembodied spirit. She can be with her most intimate friends, talk with them, and they be none the wiser."

"Did you see her while in the city?" he asked.

"Yes."

"No, no, impossible! It cannot be, for though she might deceive others, she could not deceive me. I would feel the power of that wonderful magnetism if she were near!"

"Think, Mr. Booth; did you at no time while in San Francisco feel that strange, Sybilic magnetism?" He

started up, but the sleigh gave a sudden lurch and he dropped back in his seat. Clasping his hand to his forehead, he gasped:

"Yes, yes, I did feel that strange spell for two weeks. I can't explain it. She was near—it was her spirit, though her form I could not see—no, I could not see her, but I could feel her presence. Oh, Sybil, Sybil, mysterious, unknown Sybil, though you may be thousands of miles from me, I still feel that resistless power which draws me on, and on! Heaven! I feel her presence now. She is here! She is at my side!"

"She has ever been at your side!"

"Sybil!"

"Have you been so easily deceived this time, that even your keen eyes could not penetrate the thin disguise which transformed Sybil into the singing boy, who came to rescue you from another defeat?"

Dumb amazement for a moment held Booth in its magic chains; then he made a movement toward her, but she shrunk from him, saying:

"No, no, Mr. Booth, not yet! I fully comprehend your thoughts; I know your love, and return it, but owing to a vow I have taken I shall never listen to words of love or betrothal until a great wrong has been righted!"

So completely was he under the spell that he madly cried:

"Give me the glorious privilege of righting the wrong and I will do it even though I sail through seas of blood to accomplish it! What is it? What is the wrong?"

"No, no, not yet; I can't tell you now!"

"Why not?"

"Not yet. Pray spare me a little longer!" and she clasped her hand over her heart as if to still the aching pain. "Some other time we will talk of it. Let me carefully prepare your soul for the great work on hand. You must not know yet. I want to see you awhile longer in all the glorious light of innocence, unsullied by the dark, sin-stained secret which has blasted my life and still gnaws at my heart!"

Mysterious, unknown Sybil, such was her power, that despite her strange words he would have willingly undertaken any sacrifice for her. In vain he implored her to tell him, but she insisted on waiting until they had reached the first stop in their journey, and she had assumed a garb becoming her sex.

Throughout the long, weary hours of darkness the runners cut the grinding snow. They changed horses and drivers and continued on for miles. Day dawned, and they still journeyed on, all day and all the next night, changing horses and drivers at every few miles, until they at last came to a town nestled in a valley between two mountain ranges.

Here they made their first halt to rest, and here the singing boy who had charmed San Francisco disappeared forever, and Sybil, the unknown, was in his place. But one day and one night of rest was left the passengers. It was the night before the morning on which they were again to start, and Booth and Sybil sat alone in the small parlor, on the sofa. They sat very close together while she poured a tale of woe into his ear that "harrowed up his soul, froze the blood in his veins, and made each particular hair stand on end like the quills of a fretful porcupine." He occasionally interrupted her with ejaculations of sympathy and horror, and at the conclusion of the strange, weird unbosoming of the past, arose, struck his brow with his hand, and cried:

"Can war make such devils of men?" She sat with her great dark, sorrowful eyes fixed on the carpet, while he took a few quick turns about the room. At last, pausing, he fixed his deep, tender eyes on the handsome creature before him, and in a voice trembling with emotion said: "Alas, my poor darling, how you have suffered!" As she raised those soft, dark orbs full of pleading to his face, he added: "You shall be avenged! You shall be avenged! By heaven I swear it!"

They grew more quiet, and he seated

himself at her side, while she revealed dark secrets such as she would not dare breathe to other ears. But he was now wholly hers. She had captured him completely and knew he was so thoroughly under her control, her will was henceforth his law. There were plots and counterplots and deeds of murder most foul discussed in the darkness of their room, for even the discussion of such contemplated acts would not admit of light. It was an awful rehearsal of Lady Macbeth by a real tragedienne.

When alone Booth started as if from some frightful dream, and gasped:

"Oh God, is this true? Can all this be true? No, no! Yes! Heaven help me!" He fell upon his knees to repeat the prayers his mother had taught him, but with a gurgling cry of horror sprang to his feet, while the cold sweat started from his brow as he whispered hoarsely:

"I cannot pray!" He remembered the story of the man who having sold himself to the evil one, never dared utter the name of his Maker. "Have I? Have I? Am I lost, eternally lost?" he asked, glancing at himself in the glass. Gazing on his handsome features, he found them growing more stern and fixed. His thin lips and resolute mouth were expressive of firmness and resolution. He went to his chamber, and undressing, retired to toss and roll, and secure a little much-needed sleep. Again and again, when his better nature came to join in the struggle, he started up with a low groan, only to meet, in fancy, those dark pleading eyes, and shrink powerless beneath their sway. From that hour a struggle began in the doomed man's soul which ended only with his life. Nobly he fought that irresistible power which was sweeping him on to ruin. He seemed to be standing on a crag, surrounded by roaring floods which threatened to engulf him, and with extended hands piteously calling for aid which came not. A strong wall was barring out all help; it was the lovely face and sad dark eyes which ever looked upon him from out the gloom, appealing to him to protect and defend. With gnashing teeth and the glaring eyes of a madman he started up, saying:

"Yes, yes, I have sworn to do this and I will! Great God, or great devil, whichever I serve, bring this to an end soon, or I shall go mad!"

They journeyed together as far as Omaha, where they parted company, Booth going south to play an engagement, and the mysterious Sybil eastward. She promised to meet him in Baltimore or Washington City.

Early in January, 1865, Claude Mitchell was ordered to Memphis, Tennessee, for two weeks' post duty, after which he was to join his regiment, which was with General Grant in the East, who was waiting for the winter to break up before opening hostilities on Lee's badly decimated, poorly fed, clothed and equipped army.

Having little duty that required his actual presence, Claude formed the acquaintance of many civilians in the city, among them a Mr. Henderson, from Illinois, who was speculating in cotton. Many sharp bargains were made in those days, and men of small means became millionaires in a few months. Their methods were questionable, yet they enjoyed the reputation of being shrewd business men. If living, they are honored above more honest men, and if dead their epitaphs bear witness that a crown of glory has been laid up for them in their Father's House where there are many mansions.

Among the most successful speculators was Henderson, a man of pleasing address, and apt to be taken for a gentleman. He was affable and kind, but drove sharp bargains. He had taken possession of and was operating a cotton plantation in Arkansas, not far from Memphis, and while in the latter city formed the acquaintance of the young officer of the post. One day Claude Mitchell was persuaded to accompany him to the plantation, and on their return separated at the landing, Claude to report at headquarters

and Henderson to look after some business matters. Before separating they arranged to meet at Swabs' restaurant at six o'clock that evening.

Captain Mitchell went according to appointment, but Henderson did not appear. The young officer waited until eight and then returned to his hotel to dream of his bonnie blue-eyed Bessie and ask himself if he would ever see her sweet face again.

Next morning the captain was startled with the news that Mr. Henderson had been murdered. Failing to keep his appointment, he drifted into another restaurant at seven o'clock, and as he sat down to dinner caught sight of a man sitting at an adjoining table. The stranger looked sharply at him and moved nearer in order that he might the better see him. When he had satisfied himself who he was he ran back to his table, seized a carving knife, rushed upon Henderson and plunged the weapon in his throat. All was over in a moment, Henderson was dead, and his assassin had fled. The cause assigned for the act was some unfair means in speculation which Henderson had taken, and in those days men did not stand long on ceremony.

Captain Mitchell ran down to the boat landing to send a letter by the captain of the vessel to the wife of the slain man, acquainting her of her sad bereavement, and asking for instructions in regard to the disposal of the body. He stood talking with Captain Asberry, once a well-known character of the Mississippi, when he caught sight of a figure that had occupied a place in his thoughts since he had seen him at Louisville. It was an elegant figure—manly, majestic and grand—instinct with nervous energy and animation. The peculiar poise of the head and noble carriage, as well as elegant profile, told him it was the famous actor, John Wilkes Booth.

Associated with Booth was the pleasant recollection of Bessie, and the hour of bliss spent at her side while listening to the thrilling utterances of the actor. Claude accosted him with all the ardor of a young friend, and after slightly jogging the actor's overcrowded memory, Booth recalled having met him in Louisville.

In the course of conversation Mitchell told him of the tragedy of the evening before, and what a fine fellow Henderson was; how much he prized his friendship, and that he had hoped at the close of the war to go into business with him and become wealthy in a few years. But he was gone now, and with him all his own brilliant prospects for a business success. And then there was the widow, at Cairo, a woman who idolized her husband, so unprepared for this blow. Despite his four years' soldier experience, Claude's tears began to flow at this part of the recital, and Booth's naturally tender heart vibrated in sympathy. He spoke a few comforting words to the young officer and diverted his mind from his troubles by telling him of his remarkable trip across the mountains and plains from San Francisco in a covered sleigh, and of the boy with the phenomenal singing voice who accompanied him from California. Booth said he was then on his way to play an engagement in the St. Charles Theater, New Orleans.

They met Dr. Burke of one of the hospitals, and he invited Mr. Booth, Major McGrath and Captain Mitchell to luncheon with him. They took a carriage to go to the quarters of the surgeon, and in doing so were compelled to pass the undertaker's establishment in which the body of Henderson lay.

"Will you come with me?" Claude asked Booth, as he went in to view the remains of his friend. Booth shook his head and refused politely, but with great firmness. It was difficult for Claude to realize that his friend was dead. He lay in his casket, a superb specimen of manhood. His face was not distorted and the horrible gash on his throat was hidden.

The young officer was overcome by the sight, and when he went back to the carriage his cheeks still bore evi-

dence of his feeling. He tried to apologize, but Booth stopped him.

"Never apologize for genuine grief," he said. "It is manly, and I can fully appreciate your feelings." These words were spoken in his usual gentle manner, and his face was expressive of pity. Then it changed more suddenly than it ever did on the stage. He shrunk into a corner of the carriage, his face grew dark, his features were controllable emotion, while his eyes violently convulsed as if with some untook on a look of wildness. He trembled with the intensity of his excitement from head to foot, and in a faint voice in which there was the deepest agitation, whispered:

"I cannot bear to see blood, nor a dead face. It makes me wild!"

This mood was changed in an instant. He was paler, but he smiled at his own vehemence, and made no reference to it.

By the time they had reached the restaurant where they were to luncheon with the doctor the great actor had almost completely recovered his equanimity of spirits and manner.

"When do you leave us, Mr. Booth?" Claude asked.

"To-night."

"By boat?"

"Yes."

"It does not go until midnight, so you will have several hours."

"So I shall. Can't you come to my hotel and help me pass away the time?" asked the actor.

"Certainly. As soon as I see my dead friend disposed of it will be a pleasure to spend a few moments or hours in your company."

When they separated, Booth took his hand in both his own, and with his great, wonderful dark eyes on him, said:

"Do not fail to come, my friend. There is much to talk about, if time is allowed. It seems your presence brings a sort of tranquillity to my troubled spirit." His earnest words and manner strangely impressed Claude Mitchell, who assured him he would come shortly after six.

It was seven that evening before the captain's duties would permit him to go to his appointment. On reaching the door of his friend's room he was startled at hearing a groan of agony, which seemed to come from an overburdened heart. He rapped on the door, and after a moment the well-trained voice of Booth bade him enter.

"Are you ill?" Claude asked, startled at the extreme pallor of his friend's face.

"Physically, no; mentally, yes."

"My friend, I am sorry to find you so greatly distressed. Can I relieve you in any way?"

"No; that cannot be done, my friend, that cannot be done."

"Why? Is your case so helpless as that?"

"Yes, yes! Oh, my God, my friend, I am pursued by a devil!"

"What do you mean?" Claude asked, amazed at the strange, wild, almost insane look of Booth.

"I would I were dead and out of this misery. Do you believe there will be peace after death?"

"I cannot answer. You recall what Hamlet says of dreams?"

"Yes; it is continually in my mind. But while Shakespeare was a literary genius, he was neither an accurate historian nor a philosopher. His words sound well on the stage—they do for mimic life—but when it comes to facing an unalterable eternity, they, after all are too shallow to guide one into the realms of the unknown. But one book can do that, and it was not written by man!"

"Perhaps if you would explain your trouble, Mr. Booth, I might suggest some relief."

"No, no, my friend, I cannot explain; and even if I could, my case is beyond the reach of mortal man. I am subject to fits of melancholy." Then with his handsome head bowed on his hand he sat for some moments silently staring into vacancy. At last, starting up and fixing his eyes on his friend,

he asked: "Did you ever feel an awful impression of impending evil? Were you ever forced to do that at which your soul revolted?"

"I have had impressions, but they were based on judgment. These premonitions of evil and feelings of depression no doubt have their origin in a torpid liver or bad digestion. No such abnormal condition should drive one to commit an act that was wrong."

"That reminds me the doctor gave me a prescription from which the druggist prepared a decoction. If you will excuse me I will taste the nostrums which are in my bed chamber." He rose and bowed himself out, and Claude turned his gaze upon the center table at his side, on which lay an open book face down, as if the occupant had been reading and laid it down at his entrance. Curious to know what Booth read, he took up the book, and discovered it was "Shakespeare's Plays," and it opened at "Macbeth," Act I, Scene VII.:

"If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly; if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
Might be the be—all and end all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,—
We'd jump the life to come,—But in these cases,
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions; which being taught, return
To plague the inventor. This even-handed justice
Commands the ingredients of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips: Here is doubt and trust."

If Claude gave any thought to the dark soliloquy of the murderer, it was that Booth was studying it to play in his next engagement. When the actor returned, his features were once more tranquil, and every sign of emotion gone. They talked until late in the night without any reference to the actor's strange agitation.

"I suppose you remember the young Confederate, George Odell, and his sister Bessie?" asked Claude.

"They were, or rather George was one of my dearest friends," he answered.

"Have you heard from them since leaving Louisville?"

"No. I suppose he rejoined his regiment at Richmond. A splendid young fellow was George, and it was a pity he was not enlisted in the right cause instead of the Confederacy."

"Your sympathies seem to be with the Union, Mr. Booth."

"Well, that is according to what you mean by sympathy. I pity the South; from the depths of my heart I pity her, but judgment tells me the North has right on her side—and I will add might. So in the end she will win, as she ought, and then we will once more be one great united brotherhood."

When the carriage came to take him to the boat he asked Claude to accompany him to the landing.

"I ask but a small favor, my friend," he said, with his great, powerful eyes on him. "We may never meet again, and it is possible I shall never ask another."

They were driven to the boat landing, and just before embarking Booth grasped Claude's hands in his own and in a low, solemn tone said:

"Friend, promise me that whatever may happen you will not think so hard of me as those who know me not." Claude promised, and he added "Farewell."

The glitter of insanity was in his eyes, and as he stood on the upper deck waving his hand, the captain thought his friend in a fair way for the madhouse.

To be Continued.